

Care givers explore death and dying issues

By Tim Fields

NASHVILLE (BP) — Moral dilemmas and special healthcare problems related to death and dying were explored by participants in a Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission consultation.

Baptist physicians, hospital administrators, university professors, lawyers, clergy, and ethicists convened here in early April.

Richard McMillan, professor of medical ethics at Mercer Medical School, said advances in medical technology have caused physicians and patients to reconsider moral issues such as the nature of care; the extent of patient and physician autonomy; the reasonable limits of medical capacity, such as how much care and for how long; and even the meaning of life and death.

People now "find it difficult to acknowledge problems which cannot be solved — if not today, then tomorrow. Death, therefore, does not represent an acceptable or appealing solution for medical problems," McMillan said.

As medical technology expands and costs skyrocket, every competent patient must retain the right to judge what medical treatment is in his or her best interest, he added: "A growing number of patients are expressing the opinion that treatment for them may be worse than the disease. Patients, patient surrogates, and an increasing number of physicians are expressing the opinion that there comes a point at which the exercise of capacity is not simply pointless, it has become inhumane.

"Medical capacity has at once become a marvelous blessing and a ponderous moral issue, and the ancient question — Because we can, should we?

— has taken on a totally new level of ethical imperative. Considering the astonishing medical capacity today, to say nothing of tomorrow, do we really have a choice from any reasonable humane and loving perspective in

those situations involving profound human tragedy but to allow the option to withdraw or withhold treatment which is powerless to overcome the illness?"

Bill Mason, hospital administrator of Baptist Medical Center in Jacksonville, Fla., discussed the ethical implications of a growing economic crisis in health care.

The current economic crisis in medicine is due to the age and mental ability of patients, the outbreak of the AIDS disease, new pharmaceuticals, new technology, liability insurance, and a growing shortage of nurses, he said.

"If costs keep going up, we are going to get to the point where we have to ration health care," Mason predicted. He cited increases in healthcare costs which have grown from \$12.7 billion per year in 1950, representing 4.4 percent of the Gross National Product, to \$454.2 billion in 1986, representing 10.8 percent of the GNP.

He cited the drop in Medicare reimbursements as one major factor in the economic problems of hospitals. "For every day a Medicare patient stayed in our hospital last year, we lost \$51."

Because of growing costs, Mason said, the hospital had to close a charity obstetrics clinic that had provided prenatal care and delivery for 400 to 500 babies each year. One of many moral dilemmas the hospital has faced is reflected in that while it discontinued the obstetrics clinic, it continued to give a \$2,200-per-dose heart drug to an 80-year-old woman, he said, reporting that one-third of all Medicare money is spent during the last month of a patient's life.

Mason also cited the growing AIDS epidemic as a serious threat to the healthcare system: "Our hospital treated about 80 to 100 AIDS patients last year at a cost of approximately \$100,000 per patient. Very few of these patients have medical insurance because they either lost their jobs or

were drug addicts and had no jobs."

Jeff Mobley, an attorney from Nashville, Tenn., told participants the medical profession alone has tried to deal with the realities of medical ethics, but the law is still far behind.

The primary medical issues for which the law is concerned are the right of self determination, the right of informed refusal, or control over the integrity of one's own body; and the right of privacy, he said.

"One of the moral dilemmas of the law is what we do about patients who are incompetent to make decisions for themselves," he noted.

One critical area where the law is deficient is in statutes such as those related to comatose or brain-dead patients that allow respiration aids to be removed from the patient but require that food and water continue to be given, Mobley added.

Liston Mills, professor of pastoral ministry at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, said: "Modern medical care means cure or relief from pain and suffering, when in reality some of the most meaningful experiences in life come during times of pain and suffering."

Families of patients and clergy need more room in hospitals, he said:

"There must be a change in our definition of health care. Clergy often allow themselves to be intimidated by doctors. Doctors need pastoral care and attentiveness like anyone else."

In order to improve care giving, people need to have a position on ethical issues and a fundamental acquaintance with the issues, he added:

"Finally, nurses, doctors, family members and clergy who give care need to realize that when we are through, everything we did for the patient may have been wrong. Our lives are sustained by grace, even when we don't believe it."

Tim Fields writes for the Christian Life Commission.

Baptist Record



Powerline for teens

How do we get the world back on track?

QUESTION

Has the world come to an end and someone just forgot to tell us? Everywhere I look, there is some crazy, wicked thing happening. War, poverty, and immorality are everywhere. Even the most highly-regarded persons in our society — the judges, professional people, politicians, even the preachers — are doing shameful things. How do we get our society back on track the way it used to be?

ANSWER

There are really two factors involved in your question. First, in regard to getting things back to where they used to be, that's probably impossible. No amount of effort will turn back the march of time — and if we did, what we probably would find is a big stack of trouble from those days! No one has ever lived in a perfect time or place.

But this does not alter the fact that society today is in a pretty big

mess. The Pilgrim forebears and the persons who framed our constitution would be quite amazed if they could see where we have come in just 200 years. We have accomplished some wonderful things, but we have had some significant failures too. We are not going to overcome crime, suffering, and injustice without an all-out effort. So what can we do?

First, we can work for justice through law. Inform yourself about the laws. Be aware of how laws are enforced and speak out against biased or unjust decisions. Set a good example for friends and family by being law-abiding in each aspect of your own life.

Support programs which attack the root causes of these conditions. Volunteer your own time, write to your representatives, urge legislators and city officials to uphold the moral standards of the community. Above all, maintain hope. Through prayer, a firm reliance on God's providence, and a willingness to follow his leadership no matter what he asks of us, we will be able to realize the dream of a nation under God which guarantees freedom and justice for all.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST RADIO-TV COMMISSION / FORT WORTH, TX 76150

Tribe reaches tribe

SANTA CRUZ, Guatemala — Baptists of the K'ekchi' people have appointed Manuel Hom as a missionary to evangelize the Pocomchi people. Some 34,000 Pocomchi live in central Guatemala, just south of the K'ekchi'

region. There is no Baptist work in the area. By contrast, the 135 churches of the K'ekchi' Baptist Association are thriving.



SCRAPBOOK

His hands

Remember the storm

The thunder rolls,
The lightning cracks,
And the wind howls
As the heart cries out
We find it easy
To seek out God
When troubles fall
Like torrential rain,
And answers — like the wind —
Cannot be seen;

And as the night seems darkest,
He sends the light
And the skies once more are blue,
And the times become as rainbows.

Will you remember, in each new day
Spent in carefree living,
The terrible storms of yesterday,
And to him send your thanksgivings?

—Richard A. Ryan
From Prison

Hands reached down to touch me,
When I was very young;
They held me oh, so lovingly,
To keep me from all wrong.

Hands reached out to lead me,
Down winding trails so steep;
They led through troubled waters,
Of rivers wide and deep.

They led me through each valley,
I had to go down through;
Over hills of disappointment,
Those hands mine held onto.

They led me through the darkness,
Of death, then to the light.
When my eyes were blinded,
Those hands gave back my sight.

When nails were driven through them,
Mine bled from hurt and shame.
Oh, that my blessed Savior,
Heard me call his name!

My eyes were brimming over,
And I could hardly see;
But when I saw his lifeless hands,
I knew he answered me.

—Velma A. Windham
Taylorsville

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April 28, 1988

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